

## Secrets of success

Flushed by the spotlight of five minutes of celebrity status when the GCSE league tables were published in January I am able to reflect on the reasons why we have become such a successful school.

I'm sure colleagues share my mixed feelings about the league tables. Are they fair? Do parents really understand them? Do they stifle innovation? A few years ago there was talk of the league tables being abolished, however with the increasing availability of data it would seem that even if the DfES decided not to publish, this information would still be available for less reputable organisations to manipulate. I'm sure all headteachers strive to achieve the highest possible standards in their schools, regardless of the league tables. I personally believe that it is useful for a school to be able to compare itself with other schools, it simply gives us a perspective on where we stand and it allows us to learn lessons from other successful schools.

The conundrum with the data in the league tables is that the most crude data can be easily understood by a very wide audience, e.g. 5A\*-C at GCSE, but it often presents a very simplistic and "unhelpful" picture as it takes no account of prior attainment and school context. More sophisticated data provides a much fairer picture, for example contextual-value added (CVA), but few teachers, let alone parents understand how it works. Clearly it would be helpful if the DfES tried harder to educate parents, employees and those on the outside world about how to interpret, arguably the fairest set of data, CVA.

My school is a medium sized comprehensive school, one of 13 state funded secondary schools in a local authority which also has five private schools. After many years of doing well in some aspects of the league tables, we topped the most recent tables in each category.

Bath and North East Somerset schools (state)	5 A*- C	5 A*- C including English and Maths	Average points score per student	Contextual Value added
<b>Oldfield</b>	<b>82 %</b>	<b>73 %</b>	<b>469.4</b>	<b>1019.6</b>
Beechen Cliff	70 %	53 %	397.7	1013
Broadlands	66 %	39 %	346	998.7
Chew Valley	71 %	57 %	417.4	1005.6
Culverhay	48 %	21 %	344.4	1016.6
Hayesfield	74 %	57 %	425.2	1009.3
Norton Hill	69 %	59 %	407.3	1014.3
Ralph Allen	69 %	63 %	381.6	998.4
St. Gregory's	74 %	56 %	405.7	995.7
St. Mark's	36 %	32 %	299.1	991.4
Somervale	52 %	44 %	358.8	1001.1
Wellsway	76 %	64 %	383.9	990.4
Writhlington	69 %	40 %	384.7	1002.9
Local Authority average	67 %	52 %	386	1005
National average	59 %	46 %	365	1000

There is obviously no quick fix to becoming a successful school, despite what the press might try to tell people. There is **no** magical ingredient which we exclusively own, however there are many strategies which collectively produce a successful school. For the purposes of this article I am restricting myself to activities which relate directly to exam success.

For us a foundation of success at KS4 is the use of target grades. For many years now we have given each individual student target grades for their KS4 subjects based on their individual performance at KS3. If students are to become independent learners they need to know what grade realistically, they are aiming for. Students have regular one to one timetabled sessions with their tutor to discuss their progress, students take ownership of this by recording what actions they need to take in their contact books (similar to a homework diary or planner). Tutors monitor their tutees' progress and liaise with subject teachers as appropriate. Students value the fact that they get individual "private" time to discuss progress with their tutor. As a school we recognise that this is an important role for the teacher, it counts as part of their timetable, we don't expect it to be done in teachers' own time.

Most important of all, we are fortunate to be able to recruit high quality specialist subject teachers. For us there is no recruitment crisis. I have very healthy numbers of applicants, even in shortage subjects such as Mathematics and Science. Success breeds success. As one teacher leaves I can nearly always replace that person by an even more talented teacher. We do not have any unfilled vacancies at the start of a school year, we never have supply teachers covering long term gaps and we rarely need to use supply teachers. It is essential that students experience well qualified subject teachers who are passionate and enthusiastic about their subject. Our teachers are dedicated professionals who make it their business to ensure that students know the precise demands of the exam specifications. Students must not be disadvantaged by teachers who do not cover/ finish the syllabus, or who fail to practise exam questions. It is essential that students know that they can approach any teacher outside of normal lesson time to seek further assistance and advice. Whilst some teachers on the one hand may be negative about league tables, on the other hand they use them to decide where to apply for posts. Many staff are attracted to work at a school which already gets good exam results, where education is valued and most significantly where they can actually teach their subject rather than simply manage behaviour. Teachers on interview tell me with amazement that they were able to teach for the whole hour; teachers new to this school suddenly find that they need to raise their expectations of what can be covered in a lesson with little time being lost on classroom management.

We continually push ourselves to achieve the best results we can. Each Autumn there is an Annual Review process which requires each subject area to evaluate their exam results against the subject targets set two years before. At GCSE, for example, we don't just set targets at A\* - C but also at A\* -A; these targets are set with the knowledge of the precise cohort of students taking that subject, against the background of results in this subject nationally, looking at recent school subject trends and against whole school data. Subject leaders reflect on the reasons for their success if they have achieved results better than their target and explain the reasons for any underachievement. Any noted underachievement leads to a discussion of strategies to counter further underachievement. We tap into the successful strategies employed in one subject area so that the good practice is shared with other colleagues.

From the moment that students join this school we set high expectations that students will achieve. It is important to create a culture of success and to celebrate students' achievements. I tell our incoming Year 6 students on their induction day that, regardless of how they got on in their primary schools, as if by magic once they step over the school threshold they are destined to succeed. This atmosphere is assisted by a relevant anecdote about a quiet, shy Year 7 student who goes on to achieve great things as she goes through school. We emphasise that in five years they will do at least as well as the Year 11s who have just taken their exams. We endeavour to propagate the idea that for each one of them, "the sky is the limit". As Headteacher my assemblies often focus on this central theme that they can unlock their own potential, all of the other factors are in place to allow them to succeed, they just need to tap into them. We are keen to stress to students and parents alike that the school insists on high standards, not just in terms of work, but also behaviour and school uniform. We believe that low standards are unacceptable in any sphere.

We explicitly set out our high expectations of students, but we also state that students can expect high standards from teachers, it is most definitely a two way process. We want our students to be "critical friends" in terms of telling us about their perception of the learning experience. In a formal way students are asked to evaluate specific topics of work or special off-timetable events, but students of all ages are not afraid to tell me if they think that teaching and learning is not up to standard! At regular coffee mornings with small groups of sixth formers I ask the students to be candid about their experience of teaching and learning. They know that they can be honest in their comments, they are taken seriously. I assiduously pass on the largely positive feedback to individual members of staff and also investigate and follow up on any perceived shortcomings. My advertisements for teachers pose the question "our students expect to learn and demand good teachers, can you live up to their high expectations?" This is a reality. I am delighted that students are so engaged in their learning that they wish to take the appropriate steps to make improvements. Students are equally keen to vocalise their approval for high standards of teaching and learning. I never fail to be impressed by the students' skills in assessing the abilities of potential new teachers to the school. Whenever possible we involve students in the teacher interview process, they undertake the guided tour of the school (giving feedback), they are asked about the teaching and learning after a candidate has taught a lesson and they ask questions in a mini interview with a panel of students. The students' perceptions are invaluable, they are able to pick out the candidate "who wants to talk about himself" and the one "who really cares about us in this school". Of course the students sometimes have their own prejudices, (our students seem very keen for teachers to be parents too), this must be borne in mind.

So that we do maintain the highest standards of teaching and learning it is necessary to do the time-consuming monitoring and evaluating. We believe that it is important to undertake a rigorous programme of lesson observations (actually of lessons, tutorials, assemblies, off timetable events etc). In addition to the middle managers undertaking performance management observations the leadership team have time allocated on their timetables to observe lessons across the school to "evaluate the standards of teaching and learning in the school". At any time we know the percentage of lessons which this year so far have been judged to be 'outstanding', 'good', 'satisfactory', or 'inadequate'. Currently the good or outstanding lessons stand at around 90%. In this way we can monitor from year to year our standards, we can pick up very quickly any individual staff weaknesses and evaluate whether our teaching and learning is developing in the way in which we have planned in our

school development plan. Sometimes training or accommodation issues are thrown up, but significantly it is an opportunity for us to use our outstanding teachers to share good practice and to recognise and praise those teachers who are contributing to our high standards of teaching and learning. Middle managers tend to tell colleagues when they will be observing colleagues, this may distort the “normal lesson” of that teacher, I prefer not to prewarn staff of an observation. This means that I see the “bread and butter lessons”, (it also means that teachers can’t get stressed or “over prepare”) so it is a closer reflection of the normal standards of teaching and learning. Teachers are very busy and rarely have the luxury of reflecting on their performance, lesson observations are a chance for a professional dialogue between colleagues. Teachers infrequently overstate their own performance, therefore it is a fantastic opportunity to celebrate with a teacher their strengths and to discuss their perceptions of areas for development.

Like many other schools we have a regular programme of whole school work monitoring. At regular intervals throughout the year a cross section of work is sampled. To make it manageable we do one year group at a time, the selected students bring all of their files/exercise books to the library and pairs of staff (usually an experienced colleague works alongside a more junior colleague) examine their work to evaluate the marking of teachers and the standards of students’ work across all subjects. We invite any colleagues to be involved in this process, including trainee teachers and governors, but it is a compulsory part of a Head of Faculty/Head of Year’s role to participate in some of these work monitoring sessions. We provide feedback to students, this is in the form of a tick sheet with smiley faces presented by the Head of Year, (interestingly this sheet has remained unchanged for many years). We also provide feedback to Subject Leaders about their subject staff, this sheet has changed more times than I care to remember. Increasingly teachers now want even more detailed feedback about their marking. It is not a perfect process, there are times, for example in KS 4, when students are doing coursework, it may appear that no marking is being undertaken, there is also the issue of being unable in this kind of work scrutiny exercise to evaluate the quality of oral assessment which went on in a lesson, or to evaluate accurately the assessment in a very practical subject such as Music or Drama. At Sixth Form level the work monitoring takes the form of a dialogue between the student and two members of staff; in this instance the student is given a pro-forma to complete so that they feel well prepared to participate fully in the session. Though it may seem daunting the Sixth Formers, regardless of their ability, report back positively on the process. In an ideal world we would like to involve younger students in the process, but with larger numbers of both students and subjects studied, this is impractical at present.

As Headteacher I feel tremendously privileged to be the leader of this school and naturally I am proud of our achievements. For those who may say staff here have an easy time it does depend on your definition. We only maintain high standards of achievement with our relentless drive to improve, many staff will tell you that there is more pressure to continue to get excellent exam results than a situation where any achievement is an improvement on the previous year. We always promote a “no complacency culture”, it is important to remember there is always room for improvement.